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### **Testimony regarding Senate Bill 137**

Mr. Chairman and Senate Judiciary members, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on Senate Bill 137. We, as youth who will be directly affected by this bill, are opposed to it in its current form.

**To begin our testimony, Leo Thornton, who attends New Tech in Ypsilanti,** will read a letter he wrote to his school board on the subject of an enumerated anti-bullying policy :

[Dear Ypsilanti Public School Board,]

My name is Leo Thornton, and I'm a freshman at New Tech. A few days ago, I heard that you were going to add sexual orientation and gender identity into the district anti-discrimination policy. Unfortunately I am unable to attend this meeting, as I am in Chicago at a conference. I really just wanted to express how extremely important this is.

I am a part of a youth-led activist group that works for change in schools in terms of LGTBQ issues. One thing we talk about is that we understand certain words had different meanings in the past, like Queer and "Fag." But they also have different meanings now. Queer is now used as sort of an "umbrella term for people in the LGBT community." "Fag" is now an insult to gay men. Well, anything can be used an insult, but I really wanted to clear this up.

The first time I started hearing "That's so gay" was around 4th grade. During 5th grade, it started becoming more popular. Since about 7th grade there's rarely a day that goes by that I don't hear "That's so gay" thrown around. 7th grade was also the time "No homo" came into play. I cannot even begin to tell you how many times I've heard that, how many times I hear it a day. The newest "slur" now is calling people "Fag" or "Faggot."

I identify as transgender, I'm open at my school, and the teachers are extremely respectful and supportive. When I came out to my classmates, I briefly expressed offense to all of the "That's so gay's" and "No homo's." I told them that although I don't identify as gay, I have friends and family who do. It's also just really rude, it doesn't matter if I know someone who's gay, it's wrong to say.

There are teachers that have stepped in and teachers that haven't. I fully understand that teachers can't hear everything and they are busy, but sometimes, when something is yelled across the room, I have trouble when no one steps in. I know that I could be the one, and should be the one,

but I feel like teachers have more authority and would sound more powerful if they intervened. When teachers step in, it sends the message that saying those kinds of things is NOT okay, that they are rude and offensive.

This year I've been called an "it," had rumors spread about me, had people that I barely knew ask if I'm a boy or girl or transvestite, and religion in my face. I know they were not trying to be rude, they were curious, but that doesn't mean it still didn't hurt. People have apologized, but those things really stick. I have never been physically harassed here. Our school is based on Trust, Respect, and Responsibility, and they made it clear that they don't stand for anything but that.

I have friends who identify as either Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, or Allied students (LGBTQQA). Some of them don't go to a school with these words in their policy, and have been either verbally and/or physically harassed significantly more than I have.

These words would show that everyone is important, that everyone is worth standing up for. When someone is called a "fag," for any reason, it's extremely wrong. When no one steps in, when no one recognizes things are wrong, that's when people tend to feel like no one cares. When no one says anything, it makes people feel alone, like they don't matter enough.

These may seem like simple words, simple actions, but they are a big deal. I also believe adding "gender expression" would be important. *Students should be able to feel comfortable and safe coming to their school.* By having these words in the anti-discrimination policy, and enforcing them, it can eventually give Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Allied students some feeling of **"Hey, they notice this is an issue, they notice us, they're working to make it better. They really care."**

Although this letter deals specifically with issues that LGBTQA students face, it is important to recognize that people of *all* social identities or perceived identities can be bullied/harassed for various reasons. Students of color hear racist comments all day while students of various religions are asked "How do you hide your horns?"

Adding enumeration to the proposed anti-bullying bill would protect *all* students. It would show them that they are being watched out for and protected by those adults who set the highest example in Michigan, our state legislators.

**Next, Kylah Thompson, who attends Community High School in Ann Arbor,** will speak about her experiences being bullied and harassed within the school system. Because these experiences are very hurtful and deeply affect a person, we would like to say that remembering these experiences of being bullied make Kylah very uncomfortable and are not something she likes to spend time thinking about. However, she has agreed to speak because she truly believes that adding enumeration to the proposed anti-bullying bill will make a real, positive difference in the lives of students and she doesn't want anymore students to go through what she went through.

While in middle school, Kylah was bullied for an entire laundry list of reasons, the most prevalent being her race, weight and *perceived* sexual orientation. She has also been sexually harassed within the schools and asked repeatedly if she was lying about her learning disability.

To deal with this harassment, Kylah began making herself physically sick so she wouldn't have to go to school and deal with more harassment. She began to have trouble concentrating in class and once she got home could not become motivated to do her schoolwork, which resulted in her grades dropping from straight As to Cs and Ds. She began to have suicidal thoughts and even went so far as to have a plan for how she would commit suicide. She only told her mother what was going on once she was so depressed she was very close to committing suicide. We are very, *very* fortunate to have Kylah with us today.

She knows that with an *enumerated* anti-bullying bill students and teachers will see that it is *our state* that supports her and others like her. She hopes that with *our legislators* setting this example others in Michigan will see that it really *is not okay* to bully *anyone* based on anything, be it their race, religion, ability, weight, height, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, etc., perceived or otherwise.

**To finish on a somewhat more positive note, Ashley Burnside, who attends Skyline High School in Ann Arbor,** will testify on the changes she has seen in her school because of the enumerated anti-bullying policy Ann Arbor Public Schools have adopted.

Presented below is the speech she has written for this occasion:

Enumeration not only has a clear physical effect on the anti-harassment policy, but it also has a powerful aftermath on the climate within schools and on the lives of the youth who are in them. I live in and am a part of the Ann Arbor school district. Our district has an enumerated anti-bullying and anti-harassment policy. Just three years ago, the group that I am a part of and that the youth you see here represent today, Riot Youth, was able to get our school district to add the words sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to their current policies.

This change in policy created both a personal impact and a school-wide (and even community-wide) impact. Personally, I felt a lot of wonderful emotions when I saw all of my identities listed in our school policies. The most important emotions were that of being noticed and that of being accepted. In past years, when I would look at our course syllabuses and school planners and did not see part of my identity being recognized (such as sexual orientation) I would feel as though it was a topic that was easier to be ignored. If a policy is not enumerated this is how students of target identities in any situation will feel. To see all parts of yourself, such as race, gender, class, religion, ability status etc., represented is to feel as though every part of you has been thought of. As if you are cared for by those with the power to protect you. Along with that, I feel as though the school board and officials have chosen to accept it and, more importantly, accept that, *no matter what, I deserve safety and happiness.*

In my school, my teachers have taken our enumerated district policy to heart. Every time a new marking period begins students receive a syllabus that explains not only the class rules but also the anti-discrimination policy. My teachers will tell the entire class with truth and force that they will not accept any form of bullying based on... and they will go down the list that is within the policy. It is true that not all kids or bullies will take this speech seriously. However, to hear the policy and

each identity being recognized from the very beginning of the class is still very effective to many of the students, especially the victims of the harassment.

We appreciate that you are all considering creating a state-wide policy. And we also appreciate all of the effort that you have put forth throughout this process. However, we feel that this policy will be much more effective if it is enumerated. That way, the bill has *more* power and *less* loopholes. The bill includes everyone and makes sure that no identities are left behind merely because in one classroom a teacher forgot that some students are bullied based on an identity such as weight.

We want the same outcome that you all do. We want all youth in Michigan, no matter what social background they come from or what identities they possess, to be safe. An enumerated policy is the way that every person in every district of this state will be. This is not about a laundry list or a debate about accepting various social identities. **It is about having *no harassment, plain and simple*.** Please remember that as you make your decision. Thank you.

As youth that will be *directly affected by this anti-bullying policy* we strongly urge you to create a powerful and meaningful anti-bullying bill the first time around. We believe that the correct way to accomplish this is by adding enumeration to the proposed anti-bullying bill. This will make *all students* see that they are protected and thought of and will help to keep students from being in a situation like Kyla's, making themselves sick just so they don't have to go to school the next day. It will help to make the lives of countless students easier and help make the schools a safer place for *all students*. Schools have promised safety and protection from the start and now is the time to back up that promise with an assurance. An enumerated anti-bullying bill will be part of that assurance and we sincerely hope that you take the step of adding enumeration to the proposed bill to give *all students* that assurance.